



# Indiana State Department of Health

## Epidemiology Resource Center

### Quick Facts

#### **About...Head Lice (Pediculosis)**

##### **What are head lice?**

Head lice are tiny insects that feed on human blood. They are the most common type of lice. Head lice are found on the scalp, behind the ears and near the hairline at the back of the neck. Head lice do not jump, fly, or burrow under the skin.

Adult head lice are the size of a sesame seed and are tan or gray. A young louse is the same color but smaller. Nits, or eggs, are stuck to the hair shaft within ¼ inch of the scalp and are oval and white. After the louse hatches, the shell remains on the hair shaft and darkens in color. An adult louse will live about 30 days. Lice can only live 1-2 days unless they are on a human.

##### **How are head lice spread?**

Head lice are spread by direct contact with an infested person's head or belongings (combs, brushes, towels, hats, bedding or clothes). Head lice can crawl from the head of a person to beds, couches, pillows, carpeting or stuffed animals and then spread to people who live in the same home. Pets cannot spread human lice. The lice that pets get do not infest humans. A person with head lice is able to spread them to others as long as live bugs or viable nits are present.

##### **Who is at risk for head lice?**

People who are in close contact with a person who has head lice are at risk for getting head lice. Children ages 3 – 10 years (and families with children this age) have head lice more than other age groups. Head lice are also more common among girls and less common in African Americans. Anyone can get head lice, even people who are very clean.

##### **How do I know if I have head lice?**

Itching is the most common sign that you have head lice. This is an allergic reaction to the bite from the louse. The scalp may turn red. Some people may feel tickling or something moving in their hair when lice are crawling.

The best way to find head lice is to separate the hair at the base of the neck or around the ears using a fine-tooth comb. Look for nits or live lice. When looking for head lice, nits are easier to visualize than adult lice. Nits found within ¼ inch from the scalp are usually alive indicating an active infestation. Dandruff, hair casts, or dirt may look like nits but can easily be removed with fingers.

## **How is head lice treated?**

Head lice can often be treated with over-the-counter medicine, known as pediculicides. It is important to seek the advice of a doctor if you have questions about the shampoos or medicine.

Most treatments are pesticides and can be toxic if used wrong or too often. Follow the directions provided with the bottle. Extra shampoos may be needed for people with thick or long hair. Most treatments do not kill the nits. You may need to repeat the treatment in 7-10 days.

After treatment, all nits and lice should be removed from the hair using a fine-tooth comb. If you see live lice 12 hours after you treat, the lice may be resistant. Call a doctor for advice. A doctor can prescribe treatments for these cases. Call a doctor if you see redness or crusting of the scalp.

You should check people who live in the same house for signs of head lice every 2-3 days. Anyone who has live lice or nits found within ¼ inch of the scalp should be treated. All people in the home who have lice should be treated at the same time. Do not treat family members who do not have lice or nits.

On the day of treatment, you should also do the following:

- Wash all linens, clothes, and hats worn by the people who have live bugs or nits. Use hot water and dry heat for at least 20 minutes.
- If you have items that cannot be washed you can have them dry-cleaned.
- Items that cannot be washed or dry-cleaned can be put in plastic bags and sealed for two weeks.
- Vacuum rugs, furniture, and mattresses.
- Boil combs, brushes and other items that are plastic or metal. Items that cannot be boiled can be soaked in rubbing alcohol.

## **How is head lice prevented?**

Do not share brushes, combs or hats that belong to other people.

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to: <http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/>.

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